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PREREQUISITES FOR LEARNING TO READ.

THE occupations of the primary school are more and more being determined by the stage of growth dominant in the child. Preparation for later school needs, which was formerly the basis for most of the primary education, has been met by the belief that future power depends upon the development of present power, not upon something stored up from the outside to be used on some distant day.

This essential change of base involves one of the prerequisites for learning to read, namely, that that stage of growth be reached which finds in reading a natural expression and a natural source of supply.

Through the first few years the child's development is characterized largely by his great physical activity and his instinctive social interest. As he grows, the constant and apparently aimless physical activity develops into a more definite, constructive interest. He begins to make *things,* and to put imaginary play meanings into what was before pleasure in mere bodily motion. In the same way the social instinct, satisfied at first by simple companionship, grows into an increasing desire to communicate the inner interests and to share the life of others. As this desire reaches farther, toward the sixth or seventh year, it extends to what reading can, in a measure, begin to supply. The child's absorption in some part of his experience becomes concentrated enough and definite enough to unite him sympathetically with others who have been connected with that same experience. For example: This experience may be some phase of his play — like digging a cave — in which he becomes so interested that he is eager to know about other people who have lived in caves. The play is merely the point of departure, but from it runs out a permanent interest. And reading becomes one of the means through which this interest may be satisfied. It is not that there is something in that first simple story of the cave, or Indian, or whatever it may be, which is necessary to the child as outside knowledge —

some inherent value in the story which he should absorb; but rather that it gives a fuller, richer meaning to something inherent in him, an interest through which he is living.

A further prerequisite is the mental development which makes the process of learning to read a natural one. This is, perhaps, implied in what has just been said, and is a side of the change manifesting itself at this age which is closely connected with the beginnings of all formal work. With the expansion of the social nature there must be the powers of abstraction, of concentration, and of attention to small and definite representations involved even in the beginnings of reading. First expression of any kind is vague and without control. The first movements are uncoordinated; the single sound or word stands at first for a whole combination of feelings. With the widening of experience distinctions increase, and there is a turning naturally to a more complex and definite means of language expression. This comes approximately in what is sometimes called the symbolic period. With the developing powers of abstraction there is a corresponding interest in symbols. The child of six begins to be interested in process, as shown by his willingness to work out steps when there is greater distance between the steps and the result. Symbols are no longer wholly foreign to his world. They are part of a means through which he is to discover something that he wants. When this time comes his curiosity about them is instinctive and may be turned to good account in the first reading and number lessons. But until his mental life is complex enough to need a language expression full of restriction he is not ready for reading, since reading from the first is based on a recognition of limitation in the use of the symbols employed.

Before the little child is given much direction in his drawing he is given ample opportunity for several years to experiment with his colors and pencil, to discover their possibilities in relation to what he has to say through them. In the same way the child in the kindergarten who is unable to skip to a set rhythm is encouraged to join in the movement in his own way (which may be an uncertain trot, or a run and a jump), and so in time he gains the muscular control and the cultivation of ear which enable him to interpret

with perfect poise of body any rhythm played to him. In just the same way there is the sense-experience and the co-ordination which prepare for reading. It is the experience in hearing speech and in speech utterance which is termed the hearing-speech-meaning habit; for, since language is the tool of reading, a good, free development of speech is its foundation. To begin the use of written and printed symbols without it is like attempting to teach a child the technique of music before he has had the musical experience involved in hearing melodies, in singing himself, and in all the unconscious motor expression of the rhythm sense born in him.

Summing this up, we have a widening of the social interests which shall find in reading a natural expression; sufficiently advanced development to make the mental effort natural and to avoid undue fatigue; and a good, full speech development.

On the more formal side of method, if the principle of association is made the test and is applied consistently, the method must be good. And much enjoyment may be added by the realization that this beginning work not only leads to something else, but may be in itself a vital activity directly connected with what concerns the child now. When these two conditions are met, the "I see an apple" type of sentence is replaced by something of genuine meaning; and the approach to the first reading is not made through lists of words, or other symbols, unrelated to some such meaning. This does not exclude phonics or work on disconnected words, but it makes that kind of exercise merely auxiliary in a process whose essential purpose is to establish another means of connection between the child's self and the life of his outer world.

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